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Middle Eastern Christian spaces in Europe: multi-sited and super-diverse

Lise Paulsen GALAL
Department of Culture and Identity
Roskilde University
Universitetsvej 1, Postboks 260
DK-4000, Denmark
galal@ruc.dk

Alistair HUNTER
School of International Relations
University of St Andrews
St Andrews, KY16 9AJ, Fife
Scotland, UK
aph20@st-andrews.ac.uk

Fiona McCALLUM
School of International Relations
University of St Andrews,
St Andrews, KY16 9AJ, Fife
Scotland, UK
fm25@st-andrews.ac.uk

Sara Lei SPARRE
Department of Culture and Identity
Roskilde University
Universitetsvej 1, Postboks 260
DK-4000, Denmark
slsparre@ruc.dk

Marta WOZNIAK
Department of Middle East and North Africa
University of Lodz
Narutowicza 65
90-131 Lodz, Poland
martawozniak@uni.lodz.pl

Abstract

Despite little scholarly attention, Middle Eastern Christian Churches are a well-established element of the European religious landscape. Based on collaborative research, this article examines how three mutual field visits facilitated a deeper understanding of the complexity that characterises church establishment and activities among Iraqi, Assyrian/Syriac and Coptic Orthodox Christians in

the UK, Sweden and Denmark. Exploring analytical dimensions of space, diversity, size, and minority position we identify three positions of Middle Eastern Christians: in London as the epitome of super-diversity, in Copenhagen as a silenced minority within a minority, and in Södertälje as a visible majority within a minority.

Keywords

Identity formation, Middle Eastern Christians, migrant churches, multi-sited fieldwork, super-diversity

1. Introduction

St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church in Kensington, London, was completely full. It was Palm Sunday and three of us were taking part in the Holy Liturgy service. Lucky to get a folding chair we were squeezed in between the last pew and the participants who were less lucky and had to stand. A woman in front of us was plaiting crosses of straw and shortly after we arrived she gave us each one, as she did for other newcomers. After a couple of hours of preaching and reading, switching between English, Arabic and Coptic, we left the church. Next stop was Ealing, 10 kilometers and 45 minutes away, where we attended the evangelical service of Living Water Arabic Church. The service was introduced by loud rhythmic music performed by a choir and accompanied by the preacher playing the keyboard. Almost an hour later he gave an engaged speech in Arabic with simultaneous interpretation into English. Fewer people were present, but we noticed with surprise that one of the women attending had also attended the morning's service at St Mark's.

The visit in London was one of three mutual field site visits conducted by the authors of this article in Spring 2014 as part of a collaborative research project 'Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christians in Europe' (DIMECCE).¹ The DIMECCE project addresses the question, 'What are the experiences of Middle Eastern Christian migrants in Europe?', by exploring cultural encounters, identities and institutionalisation of Iraqi, Assyrian/Syriac and Coptic Orthodox Christians² in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Denmark. As suggested in the opening vignette, the complexity of religious practices and denominational belonging within the field sites of our study is potentially huge. Experiences like the one described above compared to parallel but different experiences in Copenhagen and Södertälje add factors such as the significance of locality and access to church services to this overall complexity. This leads to the question of how the particularities of Middle Eastern Christians' specific location, the size of their community and the relation to the surrounding

¹ See <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/>. This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 291827. The project Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christian Communities in Europe is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme (www.heranet.info).

² While the vast majority of Christians in Egypt belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, Iraqi Christians belong to various denominations. Thus, some of the Iraqi Christians identify as ethnic Assyrians/Syriacs, while other Assyrian/Syriacs come from Turkey, Syria, Iran and Lebanon.

society impact on identity formation and sense of place. In order to approach this complexity and identify the particularities of diverse localities, we suggest consulting the concepts of multi-sited fieldwork and super-diversity. Both concepts have been introduced to address the apparent increasing complexity of modern life, not least the consequences of contemporary mobility of people, cultural artefacts and practices, money and ideas.³ Having been contested for not being practically feasible and limiting the degree of immersion⁴, as well as a reconfiguration of holism⁵, we want to argue that multi-sited fieldwork within a collaborative project can help to identify more relevant analytical concepts to understand the complexity of each site. This approach is further strengthened by the analytical concept of super-diversity that assists us in framing the analytical dimensions that particularly crystallised during our visits.

In the following, we intend to demonstrate how multi-sited fieldwork in the form of mutual visits helped us explore the dimensions of denominational *space*, *diversity*, *size*, and *minority position* and hence examine, understand and conceptualise the complexities and nuances across denominations and across case study countries. Firstly, we elaborate on our methodology and use of multi-sited fieldwork before presenting the three fieldsites. Secondly, the importance of place as meaningful space⁶ is linked to a discussion of super-diversity as an analytical take on the case study fieldsites.⁷ This leads, thirdly, to a discussion of community size as a crucial parameter. Community size not only influences religious practices and belonging, but also forms part of what we suggest could be conceptualised as different varieties of super-diversity. Fourthly, by including the concept of minority, the relation to significant Others is examined as an intriguing variable of super-diversity.

2. Approaching Christians and their multiple places: framework and context

A main aim of the DIMECCE project is to explore Middle Eastern Christians' cultural encounters with significant others such as other Christians, Muslims, other migrant groups and majority actors and how these encounters influence identity formation. From its start, the project constructed a shared methodology including a survey, qualitative interviews, focus group interviews and participant-observation. These have been conducted by three individual teams in each three settings, leaving room for immersion in the field that a multi-sited fieldwork approach alone could struggle to achieve.⁸ Thus, in each of the three countries, the capital city in addition to one other urban site was chosen for the study. However, to strengthen the collaborative and comparative element of the project, mutual visits in the three case study countries were planned - each of three days in London, Copenhagen and Södertälje respectively. It is the analytical benefit of these visits for the project as a whole, we discuss

³ Matei Candea, "Arbitrary locations: in defence of the bounded field-site," *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.), 13 (2007), 167-184. Steven Vertovec, "Super-diversity and its implications," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30/6 (2007), 1024-1054.

⁴ Ghassan Hage, "A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not so imagined community," *Anthropological Theory*, 5/4 (2005), 463-475.

⁵ Candea, "Arbitrary," 169.

⁶ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

⁷ Vertovec, "Super-diversity."

⁸ Hage, "A not so multi-sited," 465.

in the following, well aware that the country case studies offer other and more in-depth insights into the individual communities.

2.1. Multi-sited spaces

Though more or less locally based, movement between religiously significant sites appears to be an unavoidable aspect of being Middle Eastern Christian in the UK, Denmark and Sweden. Our experiences during the visits came to reflect this multi-sitedness of the field, as exemplified by the woman in London moving between different churches and denominations. The concept of multi-sited fieldwork was introduced within anthropology in the 1990s to grapple with the fact that the traditional understanding of a fieldsite as one bounded place as constitutive for social practices and cultural identity did not reflect the reality of human beings moving between socially significant places.⁹ Instead of approaching the object of study as territorially bounded, it has to be considered as something “ultimately mobile and multiply situated”.¹⁰ Hence, the idea of following interlocutors around to the localities where they are socially present and active was introduced, emphasizing the need to understand social and cultural life as multi-sited rather than mono-sited.¹¹ Furthermore, as argued by Marcus, the multi-sited fieldwork unavoidably offers an integral comparative perspective on “parallel, related local situations”.¹² That is a comparison that does not find its answers in external factors to the life under study, but in its situated practices. With this perspective, the ‘fieldsite’ becomes increasingly decentred. Access to different social and political contexts produces different forms of knowledges which we may consider as “situated knowledges”.¹³

In the context of the mutual fieldsite visits and the question of access to places of worship, multi-sited fieldwork is not only about following one person from one significant site for that person to another (within or across national borders). Furthermore, and despite Europe being named as the main context of the project, it was not the goal to approach or understand Middle Eastern Christian identity formation as formed by one (European) site. Although this could be one way of addressing the transnational connections across the selected fieldsites and a way of overcoming the lack of immersion that Hage is criticising, as argued by Candea¹⁴, it risks claiming a kind of explanatory holism embracing partial knowledge as parts of a wider complete ‘cultural formation’. Taking point of departure in the denominational communities and thus a relatively traditional ethnographic kind of boundedness, our visits revealed how ‘a denomination’ constructs sites differently depending on time and location as we will see in the following sections. Thus, rather to understand multi-sitedness as

⁹ Mark-Anthony Falzon, “Introduction. Multi-sited Ethnography. Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research,” in Mark-Anthony Falzon (ed.), *Multi-sited Ethnography. Theory, Praxis and Locality in contemporary Research* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). See also George E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/on the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), 95-117.

¹⁰ Marcus, “Ethnography,” 102.

¹¹ Falzon, “Introduction;” Marcus, “Ethnography.”

¹² Marcus, “Ethnography,” 102.

¹³ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Discipline and Practice: “The Field” as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology,” in Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (eds.), *Anthropological Locations. Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 37.

¹⁴ Candea, “Arbitrary,” 179.

freedom from boundaries, we – like Candea¹⁵ – find that identifying sites as what could be seen as arbitrary locations, or strategically situated single-sites in the words of Marcus¹⁶, offers room for exploring complexities within the communities under study. The decision of choosing the sites of associations and congregations as “a contingent window into complexity”¹⁷ at the same time marginalised other sites such as the family or workplace. This marginalisation was enhanced by the nature of the mutual visits which focused on attending churches and community buildings. With this approach to site, we propose perceiving it as a place which becomes meaningful as it is *practised and lived* “rather than simply being material (conceived) or mental (perceived)”.¹⁸ It is in the process of ascribing meaning to a place through practices (e.g. prayers, decoration) that place comes into being as a meaningful *space*.¹⁹ Thus, multi-sited fieldwork is useful in order to explore how different Christian locations become meaningful spaces and to keep the comparison as an integral aspect of the study. However, the possibility of exploring the meaning of locality (sited-ness or situatedness) is indeed based on in-depth fieldwork in each location²⁰ combined with the multi-sitedness of the mutual field visits. The mutual field visits became a crucial eye-opener due to its ethnographic exploration of the apparent ‘super-diversity’ in situ. Hence, we argue that the act of being in, experiencing and moving through partner fieldsites first-hand, while at the same time reflecting together as a research team on these experiences, generates a deeper appreciation of such complex dimensions of our cases.²¹

The focus on multiple places of belonging was from the beginning an interest of the project due to Middle Eastern Christians’ migrant experiences and potential diasporic identification. However, as we will demonstrate below, the mutual fieldwork visits strengthened the awareness of the importance of locally based and situated knowledge production. The different possibilities of accessing the fieldsites lead to diverse experiences of religious and cultural practices situated in place and time. Thus, our experiences reflected the denominations’ ways of constructing sites differently in different locations. Using this comparative perspective, these differences have offered us knowledge of the way social practices of Middle Eastern Christians are embedded in locally as well as globally power relations turning fieldsites into *political locations* rather than solely spatial sites. Gupta and Ferguson stress the importance of understanding place as “constructed in fields of unequal power relations”.²² Hence, practices that lead to the creation of meaningful spaces necessarily involve power relations. In other words, when studying Middle Eastern Christian places in the three case study countries, practices and the negotiations leading to these practices are part of understanding the meaning of the

¹⁵ Candea, “Arbitrary,” 178.

¹⁶ Marcus, “Ethnography,” 110.

¹⁷ Candea, “Arbitrary,” 179.

¹⁸ Tim Cresswell (2002), “Introduction: Theorizing Place,” in Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell (eds.), *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World* (Amsterdam – New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2002), 26.

¹⁹ Cresswell, “Place.”

²⁰ These will be explored in future publications.

²¹ Thank you to Professor Margit Warburg, University of Copenhagen, for raising the question about the purpose of the mutual visits at a project meeting and thus motivating us to write this article. Margit Warburg is a member of the DIMECCE project’s advisory board.

²² Gupta and Ferguson, “Discipline,” 35.

place. In the following, we will elaborate how our encounters with Middle Eastern particularities of the three fieldsites made us explore how Middle Eastern Christian spaces come into being in practice.

2.2. Middle Eastern Christian places

One aspect that emerged during our mutual visits was the conditions for Middle Eastern Christians gaining access to places of worship. This aspect is partly formed by our research interest and by our mode of approaching the communities, but at the same time it reflects different conditions for settlement and identity formation in the three case study countries. When looking closer at the two churches presented in the introductory vignette, it becomes apparent that access to places of worship depends on the availability of appropriate church buildings and the willingness of congregation members to attend a church outside their local neighbourhood. Thus, as a former Presbyterian church, St Mark's²³ was not built as a Coptic Church but was taken over by the Coptic Orthodox Church in 1975 and since then decorated and equipped in the style and traditions of a Coptic Church. The Living Water Arabic Church²⁴ was founded by an Egyptian couple in 1993 and is hosted by St John's, a Church of England congregation. The history of both churches and the woman commuting between them illustrates that denominations are not necessarily defined by neighbourhood belonging. It is necessary to look at each case community to get to know the connections between locality and church: in other words, the relationship between space and religious belonging.

In the UK, London is historically one of the first places of settlement for migrant groups and this is also the case concerning the Middle Eastern Christian communities studied in the DIMECCE project. In particular, Iraqi Christians, some of whom may self-define as Assyrians, are closely linked with West London especially the Borough of Ealing where several of their churches and other institutions can be found. The Assyrian Church of the East numbers around 500 families and built its own church in Hanwell in the mid-1990s.²⁵ The Ancient Church of the East is smaller with around 85 families and meets in a Church of England hall in neighbouring Greenford. The Syriac Orthodox consecrated their cathedral in Acton in 2010 and have a membership of 350 families while the two Catholic communities hold their services in Catholic churches – the Chaldeans number around 500 families and meet in Acton whereas the Syriac Catholics are slightly smaller around 250-300 families and meet in the neighbouring borough of Hammersmith. While Ealing has the largest population of people of Iraqi origin in London, it also has the largest Indian, Polish and Afghani communities as well as sizeable Somali, Iranian, Japanese and Irish communities making it the 4th most ethnically diverse population of Local Authority Areas in the UK in 2011.²⁶ This multi-ethnic and multicultural environment is an important aspect of the London fieldsite. Although some Christians of Iraqi origin live outside of West London, the contrast with the Coptic community is marked as members of the Coptic Orthodox Church are found all over London and further afield and therefore as a community are not identified with a specific district. Whereas St Mark's is the oldest church and with a

²³ See the church's website at <http://stmark.org.uk/> (accessed 3 November 2014).

²⁴ See the church's website at <http://www.livingwaterarabicchurch.co.uk/Default.aspx> (accessed 3 November 2014).

²⁵ Estimates on the size of the communities have been gathered from fieldwork with the communities concerned unless stated otherwise.

²⁶ Ealing Council, *State of Ealing – Population*, 2012

http://www.ealing.gov.uk/downloads/download/996/state_of_ealing-population (accessed 15 November 2014).

congregation of 600 families is the largest Coptic Orthodox Church in London, there are now four other Coptic Orthodox churches in London and a cathedral and Coptic Church Centre have been established in Stevenage, a town 50 kilometres north of London. Due to the size of the city and cost of living in central London, many community members of all the case study denominations live in the Greater London area or neighbouring counties but travel to their denominational church (some more regularly than others) to attend services and other activities.

During the Copenhagen fieldsite visit, we had to go to Taastrup, 15 kilometres west of Copenhagen, to participate in the Coptic Orthodox Holy Liturgy. Whereas most of the estimated 600 Copts in Denmark live in the Copenhagen area, they are not concentrated in one area although quite a few live in the wealthier northern suburbs of Copenhagen. Hence, the presence of the church in Taastrup can be seen more as a result of opportunity than local attachment. The possibility to take over the building from the Catholic Church at a time when the community was ready to move out of more modest premises in south Copenhagen led to their presence in Taastrup. The largest Middle Eastern Christian denomination in Denmark is the Iraqi Chaldean community with around 3,500. They are the other community to have their own church in Copenhagen, St Abba's in the district of Søborg. This building also previously belonged to the Danish Catholic Church. However, as there is only one priest who serves not only this congregation but also congregations in five other towns, the activities in each church are not at a level that the priest finds acceptable. Not only the Chaldean Church serves Iraqi Christians in Copenhagen. Members of the Syriac or *Syrian* Orthodox Church, as they prefer to call it in Denmark, are in the process of establishing their own congregation. Due to the lack of organisation, it is not possible to estimate how many Christians with ties to this denomination live in Denmark. However, most are Iraqi. In Copenhagen, the Syrian Orthodox seem to primarily worship at the Coptic Orthodox Church, while the Eastern Assyrians without a church in Copenhagen may attend the Chaldean Church. With a limited number of churches and services characterising the Danish field, many Middle Eastern Christians have to travel significant distances to find a church of their own denomination. As the capital city, the Capital Region of Copenhagen like London attracts immigrants from all over the world. In the Capital Region, 17% of the population are immigrants and their descendants and within the Copenhagen municipality, this figure rises to 22.7%.²⁷

When we visited the Swedish fieldsite, we mainly concentrated on Södertälje, an industrial city around 30 kilometres from Stockholm with almost 44% of a population of about 92,000 inhabitants having foreign backgrounds and a high concentration of Assyrians/Syriacs.²⁸ While Södertälje has immigrants from a wide range of countries with over eighty languages spoken, there is less religious diversity with more than 25% of the city's population being of Assyrian/Syriac origin. Thus, more than 20,000 Assyrians/Syriacs live in Södertälje municipality as do around 4,000 Chaldeans (out of

²⁷ Danmarks Statistik, *Indvandring i Danmark 2014* (2014), 18. <http://www.dst.dk/pukora/epub/upload/19004/indv.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2014) A descendant is defined as a person born in Denmark whose parents (or one of them if there is no available information on the other parent) are either immigrants or descendants with foreign citizenship. If there is no available information on either of the parents and the person in question is a foreign citizen, the person is also defined as a descendant. See Statistics Denmark <http://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/dokumentation/Declarations/the-population-1--january--the-movements-and-the-population-in-the-municipalities-and-regions.aspx> (accessed 27 November 2014).

²⁸ Södertälje Kommun Statistics (2013).

20,000 Chaldeans in Sweden).²⁹ Only a few hundred Copts live in Södertälje³⁰. Most Assyrians/Syriacs belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church.³¹ The rest belong to the Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church, other Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Churches or are religiously lapsed. In contrast to London and Copenhagen, Assyrians/Syriacs in Södertälje are concentrated around their churches. In Ronna, a housing area of Södertälje, they live in large apartment blocks as a result of the municipality housing policy, and seem to identify strongly with their neighbourhood. The Assyrian/Syriac presence is also visible through a large concentration of churches as well as other community activities. There are five Assyrian/Syriac churches with various activities, social and cultural clubs and associations, TV stations (Suroyo TV and Suryoyo SAT), two successful football teams called Assyriskä and Syriskä respectively³², and some active politicians of Assyrian/Syriac background. The Chaldeans also have an active community with their own church St John's and religious as well as secular activities, as do the Copts centred around Mar Mina Coptic Orthodox Church. Södertälje has received many nicknames due to its Assyrian/Syriac community. It has been named *New Midyat* referring to the first Assyrians/Syriacs coming from Midyat in Turkey who have now become the Assyrian/Syriac elite.³³ Other names include 'Little Assyria' or 'Little Babylonia' referring to the notion of an Assyrian homeland.³⁴ Although some quarters of Södertälje such as Geneta, Hovsjö and Ronna are considered by the authorities and media as 'segregated' and even in some cases a 'ghetto' where a 'problematic' Assyrian/Syriac group lives³⁵, the city also serves as a resource of Assyrian/Syriac heritage.

3. Exploring spaces of super-diversity

Stepping into the field is stepping into a particular locality or space that at first sight is constituted physically (territorially) and at second sight informs us of political, social, cultural and religious meanings of the place. First we notice buildings, streets, green areas, traffic, next we experience distances and concentration of e.g. churches. Visible differences such as clothing, signs, and goods for sale inform us about social composition of the population as regard to class, ethnicity, and religion. Observing differences in cityscape between the three sites of the fieldsite exchange visits was arguably the first and most obvious insight gained from the visits.

²⁹ Since no official statistic exists on the number of Chaldean the estimation is based on information from Chaldean priest.

³⁰ According to a Coptic priest in Stockholm, there are around 2,000 Coptic families in Sweden.

³¹ Öner A. Cetrez, *Meaning-Making Variations in Acculturation and Ritualization. A multi-generational study of Suroyo migrants in Sweden*, Ph.D Thesis (Department of Sociology, Uppsala Universitet, 2005), 29.

³² A third football team called 'Södertälje' was created recently from the former Beth Nahrin team. Players come from different backgrounds including Swedish and Assyrian/Syriac and the purpose of the team is to integrate the two groups by sport. Interview with president of Södertälje team.

³³ Jennifer Mack, "Urban Design from Below: Immigration and the Spatial Practice of Urbanism," *Public Culture* 26/1-72 (2014), 153-185.

³⁴ Annika Rabo, "Without our church we will disappear": Syrian Orthodox Christians in diaspora and the family law of the church, in Prakash Shah, Marie-Claire Foblets and Mathias Rohe (eds.), *Family, religion and law: cultural encounters in Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

³⁵ Naures Atto, *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: Identity Discourses Among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011), 238.

On our first trip to Södertälje, we were picked up by car in Stockholm by the Swedish host team and driven around Södertälje where we encountered several Middle Eastern Christian churches. Many of these were purpose-built, huge and clearly visible in the cityscape. Visually, the Assyrian/Syriac population was central to the life of the town, from its restaurants to its places of worship, associations and schools to the two football teams representing the city. Indeed, as we toured the town, one of the few people we came across who was not of Middle Eastern Christian origin was the headmaster of a new primary school designated as having an Assyrian profile which was about to open.³⁶ Aware that the Assyrian/Syriac community account for 25% of the city's population, the concentration of and visibility in shops, names, churches and other buildings referring to Assyrian/Syriac belonging reflected a composition of ethnic and religious pluralism significantly different from the situation in Denmark.

As a place characterised by its ethnic and religious pluralism, Nørrebro, a housing area close to Inner Copenhagen was chosen for a team walk. As noted by the visiting team members, the area is far from the stereotypical image of an urban deprived area. The multiethnic identity of Nørrebro was strikingly reflected in the Arabic signage and the many shops selling hijabs, kebab and water pipes. Although there was not any visible sign of the presence of Middle Eastern Christians in the area, we passed a Danish Lutheran Church that sometimes houses Arabic speaking masses. Besides the local Danish churches, Islam appeared to be the visible dominant religion in this district with the presence of the mosque Masjid Al-Nour and other symbols of Islam, like the crescent and Arabic words such as halal. This emphasis on Islam was reinforced when the team met with a representative from the Islamic Christian Study Center at its premises in Nørrebro, who focused on relations with Muslims when she discussed Muslim-Christian dialogue activities and confirmed that these have attracted very few Christians of Middle Eastern background over the years. Thus in contrast to the Swedish case, the field visit reflected the invisibility of Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark in general and in Nørrebro in particular. To understand this (in)visibility of certain groups they must, as stated by Garbi Schmidt in her study of Nørrebro, be contextualised within the city or neighbourhood where they live.³⁷

In London, the UK team had planned a guided walking tour of the London Borough of Ealing which covered not only some of the areas where churches and institutions related to Middle Eastern Christians are located but also passed through other areas which have religious institutions, shops and restaurants linked to other ethnic groups. The cityscape of Ealing left us with the impression that no one migrant group appeared dominant. Temples, mosques and churches were all present with temples (Sikh and Hindu) and churches (Church of England as well as churches offering services in Polish) being most visible.

³⁶ For several years a school with a Syriac profile has existed in Södertälje.

³⁷ Garbi Schmidt, "Understanding and Approaching Muslim Visibilities: Lessons Learned from a Fieldwork-based Study of Muslims in Copenhagen," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34/7 (2011), 1216-1229.

As researchers working on migration, we may read about the multiethnic and multicultural settings of our case countries and even of the specific areas visited.³⁸ However, due to the integral comparison of the multi-sited approach³⁹, mutual visits made it clear in practice that, concepts like multicultural, super-diverse and minority may be useful in explaining varieties of diversity in different areas, but in their particularities more refined notions had to be elaborated. Södertälje, Nørrebro and Ealing are clearly very different when it comes to multi-religious aesthetics and visual presence. At first sight Södertälje appears to be an Assyrian/Syriac city making this community the majority despite being a numerical minority; Nørrebro to be an Arab Muslim neighbourhood with Middle Eastern Christians being the minority or even an invisible minority; and Ealing to be a multicultural location positioning Middle Eastern Christians as one group among others without any clear majority. The concept of super-diversity may help us to explore further these different kinds of diversity. Steven Vertovec introduces this concept along with an empirical analysis of diversity in London.⁴⁰ Thus, one can easily place the situation of Middle Eastern Christians in London in the category of super-diversity. However, Vertovec appears to suggest the term of super-diversity to be an analytical rather than a descriptive concept fitting some but not all contexts. Instead he argues that it is necessary to acknowledge “a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live”.⁴¹ Not only does he encourage a better understanding of London as a super-diverse city, he also calls on social scientists to take into account multiple variables in conjunction with ethnicity when studying ‘communities’.⁴² Hence, super-diversity is a summary term of all the variables which should be explored due to their scale and multiple configurations.⁴³ Such variables are nets of inflows, countries of origin, languages, religions, migration channels and immigration statuses, gender, age, space/place of settlement, transnationalism etc.⁴⁴ Thus, although at the surface the three cities appear very different, not only London, but also Copenhagen and Södertälje should be examined as super-diverse with a pluralism that should not be reduced to understandings of ethnic or religious grouping only. The seemingly Arab Muslim dominance in Nørrebro hides the many ethnicities, languages, religions and social differences that characterize the area. Similarly the apparent majority position of Assyrian/Syriacs does not reveal the major internal divisions within this group or the diversity of the other 75% of the city’s population. However, if all three case study fields are super-diverse, why do the cityscapes look differently on the surface? To answer this question, we need to return to the question of how fieldsites become meaningful places and how places must be analysed as political locations. In other words, it is necessary to explore further the particular positions of the Middle Eastern Christians in the super-diversity of the three case study countries. One aspect of this is the importance of community size.

³⁸ Claire Dwyer, David Gilbert and Bindi Shah (2013), “Faith and suburbia: secularisation, modernity and the changing geographies of religion in London’s suburbs,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013), 403–419. Schmidt, “Understanding.” Mack, “Urban.”.

³⁹ Cf. Marcus, “Ethnography.”

⁴⁰ Vertovec, “Super-diversity.”

⁴¹ Vertovec, “Super-diversity,” 1025.

⁴² Vertovec, “Super-diversity,” 1025.

⁴³ Vertovec, “Super-diversity,” 1026.

⁴⁴ Vertovec, “Super-diversity.”

4. The question of numbers

The size of community is not only a question of mere numbers. Through the visits, it became obvious that the size of the communities had a substantial influence not only on the communal activities but also on conducting fieldwork. With 600 people attending the Palm Sunday liturgy in the Coptic Church in Kensington, the opportunity to organise activities that will be well-attended is greater in this one church in London than in Denmark where the total number of Copts is 600. Considering size, both London and Södertälje fieldsites have large numbers of Middle Eastern Christians. Södertälje has over 25,000 Middle Eastern Christians, the vast majority of whom are Assyrians/Syriacs.⁴⁵ London has smaller numbers but still in the thousands.⁴⁶ At the other end of the spectrum is the Danish case, with comparatively small Middle Eastern Christian congregations and a total of around 5,000 Iraqi, Assyrian and Egyptian Christians. The influence of numbers became persistent when encountering community activities during our exchange visits. Not surprisingly, the amount and range of activities depends upon the numbers of people. However, the issue of how to categorise individuals and thus count each denomination was raised when we identified people worshipping in more than one community or met Syrian Orthodox Iraqis attending the Coptic Orthodox Church in Taastrup. Thus, numbers are much more than numbers. They are also social constructions by those being counted and those who count. To be counted as being of a specific kind is also to be recognised which again opens possibilities for political opportunities and claims-making by community actors.⁴⁷

4.1. Extent of activities

In respect of size, the three DIMECCE field visit sites offer interesting comparisons and contrasts. It is here that the uniqueness of the Södertälje field site is most apparent. It was striking to observe that the host team in Södertälje did not always have to arrange observation opportunities for visiting partners in advance; on occasion they just happened more or less spontaneously in front of the researchers as they were passing by. One example occurred after a church service in St Jacob's Syriac Orthodox Cathedral, when we 'stumbled upon' a board meeting of a Syriac Orthodox Youth Association (Stockholm regional branch), which we were then invited to observe. This example illustrates that a crucial point of multisited fieldwork is the acceptance that ethnography is basically about setting up 'arbitrary locations'.⁴⁸ Despite of obvious similarities across fieldsites in language, religious and cultural practices, what we encounter is not one Middle Eastern community or culture, but indeed different Middle Eastern Christian places that have become meaningful due to different locations and activities. Södertälje is a place where the communities are concentrated in one geographical area, whereas in London and Denmark the communities are more scattered. This means that community practices in Södertälje are greatly facilitated, whereas those involved in making connections and activities in the other fieldsites have to negotiate greater distances, with implications for the richness and spontaneity of community practices. Comparing the visits to Södertälje and

⁴⁵ Södertälje Kommun statistics.

⁴⁶ This estimate of the London's Middle Eastern Christian population is derived from information given by community representatives in London.

⁴⁷ Paul Statham, "Political mobilisation by minorities in Britain: negative feedback of 'race relations'?" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 25/4 (1999), 565-766.

⁴⁸ Candea, "Arbitrary," 179-180.

Copenhagen, the Danish hosts frankly admitted their difficulties in arranging people for the team to meet and activities to attend. Indeed we were not able to meet clergy from denominations other than the Coptic Orthodox during our visit because the only other regular priest, the Chaldean, was not preaching in Copenhagen that weekend but travelling elsewhere in Denmark. This practice of worshipping in different parts of the country on alternate Sundays is common in Denmark and indicative of the scattered nature of the communities and the larger distances across which connections and activities have to be negotiated.

Although the London fieldsite also witnesses this ‘scattering’ aspect, the range of activities in London is just as diverse as in Södertälje because of more numbers in the first place. All the relevant denominations for the DIMECCE project hold weekly Sunday services (some such as the Coptic Orthodox also have services during the week) and although some service times clashed and logistics had to be considered, the British team were still able to offer their visitors a ‘menu’ of services allowing a comparison of four services attended. Recognising that community activities in London go beyond church services, the group also attended the weekly St Mark’s Coptic Orthodox youth meeting and a children’s Easter party being organised by the Assyrian Society of the United Kingdom at their premises in South Ealing.

The lack of activities in Denmark compared to activities in Sweden and London emphasised the importance of examining how the size and composition of the communities influence the formation of practices and identities. In this regard, the concept of space became useful in order to identify the specificities of each community. This is further supported when addressing space at the transnational level.

4.2. Transnational spaces

In scholarly writing about migrant communities, it has become commonplace to describe and analyse the transnational ties linking migrants both with their places of origin and with compatriots who have settled in other countries. Indeed, the transnationalism approach is held by many contemporary scholars to be the dominant paradigm in migration research.⁴⁹ While such links and exchanges have become an everyday part of life for many migrants, it is still exciting to come across such ties in unexpected places, as experienced during the field visit in Denmark. Speaking with some members of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Taastrup, Denmark, after the mass, the UK team was struck to hear of their strong transnational connections to the Coptic Orthodox Church in Scotland, and particularly to a priest there who acts as their spiritual father. During an earlier interview, this same priest had mentioned his transnational pastoral activities, facilitated by communication platforms such as Skype and web-based forums such as online bible study sessions. Subsequently witnessing these connections in action, one of the members of the Danish congregation gave the UK researchers a small bracelet featuring Coptic symbols to present as a gift to the priest, whom they were due to meet the following weekend in the Scottish church. Also transnational links between Assyrians/Syriacs as well as Copts in Sweden and the UK became visible during the field visit to London. At the Assyrian

⁴⁹ Thomas Lacroix, “Transnationalism and Development: The Example of Moroccan Migrant Networks,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35/10 (2009), 1665–1678. Steven Vertovec, “Migration and other Modes of Transnationalism: Towards Conceptual Cross-Fertilization,” *International Migration Review* 37/3 (2003), 641–665.

Easter party, one man recounted that he had invited Swedish Assyrian/Syriac representatives to attend specific events being held in London. Similarly, after a mass in St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church in London, the researchers were asked to use their contacts in Mar Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in Södertälje to help publicise the 'Anointed Servant' concert⁵⁰ in Sweden which was to take place later that month. Such field experiences are analytically interesting and productive: by participating in such material exchanges, researchers also become more trusted by their respondents. Furthermore, the circumstances of these examples show very clearly the value of such visits in bringing to light the significance of the size of the fieldsites under study. Although we have since then encountered several transnational links across all three countries, some being church based, others family based, the importance of building a sense of community at this wider transnational scale seems to be more important in contexts where the size of communities in a given city/country is small (as is the case for Copts in Scotland and Denmark). A consequence of the convergence of community size, invisibility and transnational relations is that organised transnational *political* activities are less prevalent in contexts with smaller size communities.⁵¹ Although demonstrations were held in all three countries as a response to the situation of Christians in Iraq, the political protests appear more occasional with lesser influence on group practices in Denmark. As this difference became apparent during the mutual visits, it led the Danish team to look for growing public recognition of Middle Eastern Christian immigrant groups due to an increasing national and international focus on the situation of Christians in the Middle East which could lead to cross-denominational alliances.

By exploring the impact of numbers, it becomes obvious that although super-diverse, the place of Middle Eastern Christians in the super-diversity of each case study country represents different varieties of super-diversity. London appears as the epitome of super-diversity with a religious, ethnic and social complexity in which Middle Eastern Christians are entwined. Different migration histories leave Copts as the more numerous but residually scattered group primarily belonging to the middle or higher middle class, while Iraqi and Assyrian Christians are associated with Ealing due to the presence of religious and community institutions although many members reside outside of this area. However in both cases the large number within the wider London area ensures a solid basis for a wide number and variety of community activities. In Denmark, super-diversity is marked by smaller numbers and lesser concentration of each migrant group and thus less robust organisations. This results in activities which are provided on a limited and partly episodically level. Södertälje is a third variation of super-diversity with a high concentration of one group of Middle Eastern Christians, the Assyrian/Syriacs, who dominate in numbers as well as visibility. This creates a stronger and more coherent community basis than in both London and Denmark allowing depth in activities identified with the ethno-religious background of the Assyrian/Syriacs.

⁵⁰ The concert was performed by St Kyrel choir, which consists of Coptic youth from the UK and France. <http://stkyrelchoir.com/> (accessed 20 December 2014).

⁵¹ Lise Paulsen Galal, "Copts in diaspora: transnational belonging as 'home' is changing," in Allyson Eamer (ed.), *Border Terrains: World Diasporas in 21st Century* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012).

However, size is not only influencing the extent of activities and links across local and national borders. Size also influences how the communities are positioned as minorities. The concept of minority may help us to further deepen our understanding of the varieties of super-diversity within the three case study countries.

5. Minority among other minorities

During our visit in Södertälje, we had lunch in a small pizzeria. We were the only customers sitting in the restaurant, as the owner was mainly catering for take away orders. While waiting for our *lahme bajin* (a Middle Eastern version of pizza), we chatted with the owner and had a look around his shop. The restaurant area was filled with symbols of his Syriac and Christian belonging. Among the Christian symbols were crosses, crucifixes, and a picture of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. Directly below the Last Supper picture was a photograph of the Syrianska FC football team, and on other walls, there were photographs of his sons dressed in the club colours. He proudly told us about their participation in the club and the visit by the former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson, pointing to a photograph of this. The pizzeria was located in a shopping area that also included a church and a shop selling ‘Assyrian/Syriac’ food. Combined with our drive around Södertälje from one church to another, passing huge banquet halls, and the football stadium, it became clear that there are some difficulties in denoting Assyrians/Syriacs as a minority in Södertälje. Despite their immigrant and numerical minority status in Södertälje as well as in Swedish society as a whole, their visibility and social dominance in Södertälje suggest depicting them as a majority within the minority.

As a point of departure, the Middle Eastern Christians in the three case countries may all be denoted as minorities due to their numerical minority status and different ethnic and religious background compared to the national majorities. However, as Christians coming from countries with a Muslim majority, they not only arrive with a religious minority experience, they also ethnically and/or nationally belong to immigrant groups in the countries of residence that consist of a majority with a Muslim background. With the experience from Södertälje it became clear to us, that this double minority status, as some have termed it, is displayed in different ways depending upon the location.

Although the concept of being a double minority has been used to characterise the position of Middle Eastern Christians outside the Middle East⁵², it does not seem apt to understand the situation of Assyrians/Syriacs in Södertälje. Bearing in mind that some Christian communities in the Middle East reject identifying as a minority⁵³, we use the concepts of minority-majority as analytically informed and relationally defined. A perspective on minority is preoccupied with how modes of management

⁵² Mara A. Leichtman, Mara A., “From the Cross (and Crescent) to the Cedar and Back Again: Transnational Religion and Politics Among Lebanese Christians in Senegal,” *Anthropol Q.* 86/1 (2013), 35–75. Una McGahern, *Palestinian Christians in the Israeli state: State attitudes towards non-Muslims in a Jewish state* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵³ Lise Paulsen Galal, “Coptic Christian Practices: Formations of Sameness and Difference,” *Islam and Christian - Muslim Relations* 23/1 (2012), 45-58. Fiona McCallum, *Christian Religious Leadership in the Middle East: The Political Role of the Patriarch* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010). Andrea Zaki Stephanous, *Political Islam, Citizenship, and Minorities: The Future of Arab Christians in the Islamic Middle East* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010).

of cultural and/or other differences are creating, sustaining, changing and subverting unequal power relations between majority and minority.⁵⁴ Hence, a minority is not a minority due to quantitative or so-called objective criteria such as numbers, specific language, culture, religion or ethnicity which are the criteria that The UN Declaration on Minority Rights has adopted.⁵⁵ What makes a minority is the qualitative aspect of power inequality. The difference in power is reflected in the minority's lack of power to define what is 'normal' within a specific context, e.g. the national context. The access to power of definition is of course often more difficult to obtain if a group is a substantial minority in numerical terms. However, this is not the crucial point in order to explore the process of exclusion that a minority is facing.⁵⁶ In other words, minority and majority are considered socially and historically constructed through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Addressed as political locations, Middle Eastern Christian places are coming into being in relation to significant others. Concerning visibility and dominance, Assyrian/Syriacs do not appear to be the minority within a wider immigrant minority group in Södertälje, but instead a majority that are publicly recognised and supported by the Swedish majority.

In contrast, our visit to the Copenhagen fieldsite raised the idea of a 'blindspot' concerning the engagement of state and societal actors with Middle Eastern Christian communities. Visiting Nørrebro and meeting a representative from an organisation facilitating interfaith dialogue, it became clear that Christians were framed as the majority and Muslims as a minority in the Danish context. As Middle Eastern Christians are neither Danish Lutheran Christians – the majority, nor Muslims – the minority in this particular majority-minority framework, it leaves them in what can be termed a blindspot as they are a religious minority within a larger ethnic minority but are not recognised as such and may in fact be misrecognised by state and societal actors who are unaware of the diversity of Middle Eastern societies. This idea of a blindspot later became obvious to the UK team in their own fieldsites with public actors particularly at the municipal level or working in governmental institutions appearing unaware of Middle Eastern Christian populations in their midst.⁵⁷ Returning to the concept of visibility this is not only a question of visual presence, but also a question of public recognition on one hand and voices from minority groups speaking publicly on the other, something that is both disturbed and strengthened by international events.⁵⁸ Since Middle Eastern Christians due to phenotypical characteristics are generally mistaken for being Muslim but are not presumed to be part of the Christian majority population, their invisibility is followed by a feeling of misrecognition. Thus in relation to the majority, it is more appropriate to conceptualise Middle Eastern Christians in Denmark and the UK as a minority within a minority. The reason for preferring this concept is its focus on the relationship to the majority, in this case a general lack of recognition by wider society or state actors. In contrast, the double minority concept tends to be used to connote the emotional

⁵⁴ Lise Paulsen Galal, "Anerkendes af hvem og for hvad? Et minoritetsperspektiv," in Simon Laumann Jørgensen and Morten Sandberg (eds.), *Kulturlighed: Identitet og anerkendelse* (Aarhus: Philosophia, 2006).

⁵⁵ C.f. Patrick Thornberry, "Minorities – what are they?" in *Minorities and Human Rights Law. Minority Rights Group Report* 73 (1991).

⁵⁶ Galal, "Anerkendes."

⁵⁷ In contrast, constituency MPs appear to be more knowledgeable of these communities in their districts.

⁵⁸ Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith, "Introduction", in Haddad, Yvonne Y. and Jane I. Smith (eds.), *Muslim Minorities in the West. Visible and Invisible* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002).

consequences of being disempowered in two respects (e.g. through ethnicity and gender⁵⁹, or through ethnicity and old age⁶⁰). Although finding similar characteristics in Denmark and the UK concerning lack of awareness by public actors, the different characteristics of super-diversity in the two countries seem to leave Middle Eastern Christians in London with greater opportunities for community mobilisation and claims making. Hence, exploring power relations are not only a matter of identifying boundaries and thus identities. Ruane and Todd argue, “symbolic boundaries and symbolic content, social boundaries and the intricacies of institutional organizations, are intrinsically interrelated”.⁶¹

This became clear during the mutual visits as we became aware that other power struggles had a significant impact on community practices and identities. One striking feature of the visit to Södertälje was the Assyrian/Syriac split within the Syriac Orthodox community. From existing literature⁶² and discussions with colleagues working on the Swedish case, the other teams were aware of this factionalism. It is a divide which manifests in two dioceses, rival lay associations and even football teams. The extent of the schism became clear during our tour of Södertälje when our hosts pointed out neighbouring churches of the same denomination but indicated what faction they were aligned to. This awareness of internal splits appeared not only useful when studying the same communities in the other two case study countries, but also raised our general awareness of internal struggle as significant for identity formation. Once again it became clear that Assyrian/Syriac identity must be analysed as situated, since we realised in later fieldwork that the situation in the British as well as the Danish context differed significantly from the Swedish one. In brief, the term ‘Assyrian’ in the British and Danish contexts generally referred to those who denominationally identified with the Assyrian Church of the East or the Ancient Church of the East (although some members of the Chaldean Catholic Church may also self-identify as Assyrian). The Assyrian/Syriac terminology was meaningless to them and the majority of Syriac Orthodox in the UK – belonging to the denomination who endure this division in Sweden – reject the Assyrian term. While this raises interesting research questions as to why the situation is so different in the two countries, it also suggests proceeding with caution when making methodological decisions based on visits to other partners’ fieldsites before one has become familiar with one’s own research context.

In contrast to the Assyrian/Syriac denominational split in Sweden, the visit to the Coptic Orthodox Church in Denmark revealed harmony between denominations. After the mass, lunch was served in the community premises beside the church. The lunch was prepared and served by an Iraqi Syriac Orthodox, one of the deacons was an Iraqi Syriac Orthodox, as were other actively involved members. To our surprise, we realised that the community was not as clearly bounded as expected, but influenced by the lack of alternative worship opportunities for Syriac Orthodox. Again we could relate

⁵⁹ C.f. Yanick St. Jean and Joe R. Feagin, *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁶⁰ C.f. James Dowd and Vern Bengtson, “Aging in Minority Populations an Examination of the Double Jeopardy Hypothesis,” *Journal of Gerontology* 33/3 (1978), 427–436.

⁶¹ Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, “Ethnicity and Religion: Redefining the Research Agenda,” *Ethnopolitics* 9/1 (2010), 2.

⁶² E.g. Önvér A. Cetrez, Sargon G. Donabed and Aryo Makko (eds.), *The Assyrian Heritage. Threads of Continuity and Influence* (Uppsala, Uppsala Universitet, 2012).

this to the limited size of both communities which – as later fieldwork confirmed – also encouraged the Coptic Church to welcome these newcomers in order to strengthen the community.

Such splits and bonds make the idea of one community defined only by their religion or minority status problematic, and again we return to the concepts of ‘political locations’ and ‘super-diversity’ in order to understand how power relations and struggle are constitutive for composition and practices. As super-diverse locations, the case study fieldsites are characterised by a multiplicity of potential relations (ethnically, socially, religiously, gender, age etc.) that invites empirical and multisited studies to produce knowledges of identity formation and practices.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have explored how visiting partner fieldsites in the course of multi-sited, multi-team comparative research helps the research team to develop more nuanced analytical categories. In particular, we have examined how the analytical categories of space, super-diversity, size and minority have been refined and nuanced in order to be able to comprehend the complexity of the diverse fieldsites of the project. The experience of our field visits taught us that the concepts of super-diversity and minority need to be situated and specified in relation to other contexts. Comparing the visited fieldsites allows us to identify three different varieties of super-diversity in urban settings. London (the United Kingdom) appears as the epitome of super-diversity that offers a diverse conglomerate of Middle Eastern Christian sites reflecting the general presence and visibility of ethnic and religious pluralism. These spaces are coming into being as meaningful places through continuous community practices. In Copenhagen (Denmark), such sites are smaller and less visible reflecting Middle Eastern Christians’ position as a minority within a minority. The practices that ascribe meaning to these geographical spaces are situational with larger breaks reducing the practices to mainly religious services. These places reflect a super-diversity of Copenhagen that is characterised by immigrant policies that reduce the complexity and homogenise the so-called third world country immigrants as of one kind. Regarding the Assyrians/Syriacs in Södertälje (Sweden), they appear as a majority within a minority creating the locality of Södertälje as a meaningful space of Assyrian/Syriac belonging. Hence, the super-diversity of Södertälje offers Assyrians/Syriacs a resource for identity formation that may benefit other Middle Eastern Christians in their search for recognition. At the same time, the depth and variety of both secular and religious activities leave the Assyrian/Syriacs with a continuous struggle over how to define what it means to be Assyrian/Syriac. This is a struggle which new participants try to influence by creating new community places such as the new primary school with an Assyrian profile.

Whereas, the differences between the two Scandinavian countries of Denmark and Sweden confirmed the influence of different national politics towards migrant groups, it is at the same time important to be aware of the risk of over-interpreting based on an ‘arbitrary location’ as Södertälje. Although the impression of Assyrian/Syriac concentration in Södertälje is true, they also live scattered all over the country. Hence, what the visits reminded us was not so much the idea of particular British, Danish and Swedish models, but the necessity of exploring the particularities of the location, size, history of migration, and cultural encounters in order to understand processes of identity formation.

With the project's general interest in encounters with wider society, the experiences during the visits allowed each team to consider blindspots in their own case country. Hence, the apparent active role of the Danish Church and religious organisations like Inner Mission, made the Swedish team reconsider exploring the role of similar organisations in Sweden. Also the growing awareness of the invisibility of Middle Eastern Christians in the UK and Denmark has subsequently allowed these teams to pursue this theme both with public actors and community members and to explore the implications of being a minority.

As a conclusive remark, we may argue that without the mutual field visits, these varieties of super-diversity would not have been easy to identify. They are the result of direct comparisons of field experiences that gave a firsthand idea of differences of significance to understand how Middle Eastern Christian places in London, Södertälje and Copenhagen come into being as multi-sited and super-diverse.

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